

CENTRAL ASIA BRIEFING SERIES: A REGIONAL BRIEF

The Central Asia sub-region is positioned in Euro-Asia which includes 5 independent states, namely, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan; Turkmenistan and Kazakhstan. They won their independence upon the collapse of Soviet Union in 1991. They share many commonalities from the past and at present. Knowing them will help to address successfully their root causes and cause-relationship factors in designing the ICIMOD activities.

Below are the key facts about the region:

Population, total (millions)	59
Population density	15 people per km ²
International borders:	Afghanistan; Russia; China & Iran
Life expectancy at birth, female (years)	69.20
Life expectancy at birth, male (years)	63.95
GDP (current US\$) (billions)	2.81
GDP growth (annual %)	7.00
GNI, Atlas method (current US\$) (billions)	2.57
Inflation, consumer prices (annual %)	..
Foreign direct investment, net inflows (% of GDP)	12.04
Unemployment, total (% of total labor force)	..

Socio-economic and environmental commonalities:

Economically, these countries were regarded as the raw-material supply basis for the Soviet economy where the most of the resource extensive heavy metallurgy; cotton and agricultural production were concentrated in the region. A rigid soviet style planning on 5 year intervals would impose quotas for delivery of products for the Soviet republics (15 republics incl. 5 of the CA region).

Upon collapse of the Soviet economy, on one hand supply chain was disrupted due to lack of demand in other countries. This translated in closure of many factories; economic loss for cotton growers; higher unemployment rates and labor migration by millions of Central Asian population.

On the other hand, the crisis has forced the nations to search for new ways of standing up on their foot. Success rates for painful transition process vary from sector to sector and state to state: economic liberalization; progress in governance and human rights issues differ from country to country. However it has been widely recognized recently that the battle was won in most of the countries at the expense

of environmental destruction often, when the devastating economies had nothing but to jeopardize the state of environment for sake of people's livelihood.

Since mid of 2000s, the situation is improving to the greater extent: with sustainable development mandate for the CA governments struggling to balance the competing interests for continued economic growth and environmental sustainability.

Besides, the lessons from the bitter common past surrounding the notorious Aral Sea Crisis and Aralkum desert covering territories of Kazakhstan; Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan is still alarmingly fresh.

Pressures on environment coupled with demographic explosion in terms of population growth are significant: with 7 times of growth in past 100 years from 8 million heads to 59 million people.

High poverty rates and yet to be modernized/upgraded to higher efficiency industries and businesses, low productivity mono-culture farming practices in the region are major anthropogenic factors depleting the natural resource base in the CA region and exacerbating vulnerability to desertification.

Aridity and arid lands prone to droughts called "garmseel" and strong winds of "afganetz" cause further erosion of already fragile top fertile soil layer.

As most of the rivers are trans-boundary, the countries start adopting the eco-system approach. Large rivers like Syrdarya and Amudarya originating from Pamir and Tien Shan mountains seldom reach the Aral Sea (one of major reasons for the sea drying-up) due to excessive resource extraction for irrigated farm lands.

Dust storms from industrial/mining sites, Aralkum desert, the dried up bed of the Aral sea disperse fine particles of high saline/nitrate content pesticide residues up to 500 km range and cause public health nuisance. Additionally, the natural processes and ecosystems are severely affected with resulting disruption of natural atmospheric aerosol cycle contributing to formation of Atmospheric Brown Clouds perceived to be causing retreat of Central Asian glaciers, similar effect of the ABC in the Himalaya.

Due to its geographic location in seismically active zone, the region is highly susceptible to the natural disasters and calamities, frequency of extreme weather conditions and changes in climatic patterns has increased in recent years.

Environmental Refugees fleeing from zones of Aral Sea and in search for potable water sources are not any more a new phenomenon for the region.

In all the FSU CA countries, literacy rate is at about 99, 5%. With number of schools, hospital beds and doctors per 1000 population they still rank relatively high.

For some combined indicators on their Human development indexes, governance issues and corruption perceptions we have provided the latest data from internationally recognized sources such as the Human development report and Transparency International Annual report.

For Ease of Doing business data and ranking for CA countries, the 2008 figures will be shared with all of you once we receive the latest data release from the World Bank/IDA office.

Environmental challenges need to be dealt in the holistic and full cycle manner from the policies mainstreaming environmental concerns to their actual on-ground enforcement and compliance. Mechanisms for liabilities for non-compliance and payments for ecosystem services and goods are revolving to differentiated extent in each of the countries. The Central Asia's richness in natural resources, oil and gas on the other hand imposes the sort of challenges "Resource curse" syndrome faced by many resource rich countries in NEA.

The countries share so much in common. Indeed, their common environmental problems are viewed as the galvanizing factor for their strong to current date regional cooperation. Provided here is the list of some regional cooperation modalities active at present:

- I. A Regional Agreement on Addressing Aral Sea Basin Environmental Catastrophe with 2 formal Inter-state Commissions:
 1. Interstate Sustainable Development Commission (ISDC) backed with
 - a. 1. Secretariat and
 - b. 2. Scientific Information Center (SIC, Turkmenistan HQ) with branches in each of 5 countries.
 2. Interstate Coordinating Body on Water Withdrawal
- II. Regional Environmental Action Plan (REAP, 2001)
- III. Central Asian Decision-Making Support System developed by SIC/ISDC.

One of the coordinating mechanisms, The Interstate Sustainable Development Commission (ISDC) for Central Asia held its Ministerial Meetings from 24 to 25 June 2008 in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan, where the final draft of the Central Asia Sub-regional Sustainable Development Strategy (SSDS) was taken-up, following recommendations of roundtables with civil society in five countries.

The draft document on Central Asia's Sub-regional Sustainable Development Strategy (CA SSDS) was developed by the Scientific Information Center. The draft had been consulted with civil society at national and sub-regional levels from December 2007 through May 2008. Over 200 organizations in the countries of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan participated in roundtable plenary. Furthermore, the draft of SSDS was presented by Tajikistan SIC/ISDC branch during the First International Forum on Sustainable Development for the Euro Asian continent, June 3-5, 2008 in Astana.

The Central Asia being the gate to Europe and Asia, the EU/EC puts considerable support to these countries through its new Strategy for Partnership with Central Asian Countries adopted by the EC in June 2007. The strategy puts for the first time political guidelines for a considerably enhanced EU commitment in Central Asia. Implementation of the EC regional assistance strategy for 2007-2013 is reviewed and evaluated at least every two years. The European Investment Bank (EIB) will be playing an instrumental role along with the EBRD and WB funding for projects in CA.

Environmental Sustainability and fair access to water resources/integrated water management are featured among other 5 priority focus areas along with rule of law, human rights and governance issues, European Education Initiative focusing on e-silk-highway and long distance learning; economic development/trade and investment and energy and transport links.